



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 4

Issue 2 *Harvesting our Strengths: Third Wave
Feminism and Women's Studies*

Article 8

Apr-2003

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Ashleigh (2003). From Suffragist to Apologist: The Loss of Feminist Politics in a Politically Correct Patriarchy. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(2), 91-99.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss2/8>

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From Suffragist to Apologist: The Loss of Feminist Politics in a Politically Correct Patriarchy

By Ashleigh Harrisⁱ

Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which feminist politics have been dissolved since the 1980s, most notably in the popular cultural sphere, so as to make feminism appear anachronistic. It considers how various discourses and texts have sought to efface the political impetus of feminism through claims to political correctness. Young women are thus interpolated into a more insidious patriarchy that re-inscribes female shame, guilt, passivity and silence in both professional and personal contexts, at the same as it espouses the discourse of equal rights. Many are not only apologizing for the equal rights that been “granted” to them, but have also become apologists for this “benevolent” patriarchy. This article opens the debate as to how feminist politics may be revived given the ubiquity of these de-politicising discourses.

Key Words: third wave feminism, South Africa, backlash

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This article emerges out of a series of observations about how feminist studies have been eroded away in academic institutions the world over, partially through the systematic closure of gender studies courses, partially because of the claims that feminist ideologies have been incorporated into syllabi and are, therefore, no longer necessary as a separate area of study, and partially through the vaguely defined, yet thoroughly maintained, argument that in an era of sensitivity to the ways in which power is distributed in various societies, feminist politics are no longer “necessary.” In the course of this article I will dismantle these types of arguments, and will suggest instead that such opinions do not emerge out of an increased social and political awareness, but rather out of a more insidious form of patriarchal distribution of power in a variety of societies.

The accusation by the Western world that it is in the Third World and the Orient that patriarchies continue to exist in the most severe forms is not only an example of continued Western arrogance, xenophobia and racism, but also a very serious refusal to analyze and engage with the complex workings of patriarchy within Western societies themselves. Furthermore, Western societies’ assumptions that the areas in which patriarchy exerts its oppressive force are now predominantly restricted to domestic violence and rape attempt to reduce patriarchy to the realm of the personal and thereby refuse to acknowledge the broader socio-political manifestations of patriarchy that often underlie such personal violations, and, in my view, often seek to condone such behavior. A pertinent example of this is the construction of masculinity in popular culture and the press. The ease with which the blame for patriarchal oppression is apportioned to “cultural difference” is a highly problematic issue and “restricting” patriarchy to the realms of sexual violation and rape is yet another mode of ensuring that responsibility for continued patriarchal modalities of power is assigned to the space of social “other,” whether that be the criminal rapist or the culturally defined other. This article seeks to

investigate the patriarchal modalities of power that infuse mass Western culture, the reasons why these modalities are negated as being patriarchal, and the problems this poses for contemporary feminist politics.

We are all familiar with the modes through which patriarchy defined and entrenched itself in the early part of the twentieth century in the Western world, most notably through invoking discourses of nature and Christian morality.ⁱⁱ However, the modes through which patriarchies adapted their use of such discourses, seemingly as a response to increasing demands by suffragists, feminists and those sympathetic to the call for equal rights, but in reality as a guise to perpetuate patriarchal systems of power, is seldom considered. A salient example of such an expedient form of adaptation can be seen in the poster campaigns to recruit women for the First World War effort in Britain. Immediately prior to the war, severe anti-suffrage campaigns employed the discourses of ethics, religious faith, and nature as unquestionable justifications for women's passive and domestic places within society.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the campaign to recruit women for the war effort, particularly for the women's land army and the munitions factories, suddenly represented women as strong-willed, adult, noble, physically able and adept in work places previously considered the exclusive domain of men. The ethical and god-fearing woman was now expected to move from the private to the public sphere. That this politically shrewd depiction of women clearly emerged to suit the greater needs of the nation is an effective example of the adaptability of patriarchy, of which there are countless other examples that are beyond the scope of this argument.

The focus of this article is a more contemporary context in which patriarchy adapts to its most subtle and insidious form: a form that uses a variety of sophisticated disguises, one of which is the discourse of political correctness. This adaptation emerges out of the relative success in the socio-economic sphere of the post-war feminist movements in the Western world which gave middle-class women suffrage, reproductive rights, the space in which to critique misogynist and patriarchal cultural and media production, and many other gains. These gains all owed a great deal to the increasing use of liberal humanist discourses across the globe. It is this liberal humanist discourse upon which political correctness is predicated, and it is patriarchy's ability to adapt that has ensured its survival in a politically aware and correct era.

Before I engage in this discussion of political correctness and how it may be seen to relate to patriarchal beliefs and ideologies, I wish to make clear that I do not mean to re-engage in the political correctness debate surrounding gender in the early to mid 1990s. Obviously, some of the concerns that I have regarding political correctness emerge from that debate – but it seems to me, admittedly from a South African perspective in which issues of political correctness continue to dominate social and media discourses, that since such early 1990s' discussions and debates, the form of political correctness itself has been altered, and in certain situations shifted into becoming something more insidious in its perpetuation of the ideologies that it claims to counter.

Deborah Cameron raises the issue of right-wing critiques of political correctness as a form of policing thought, and supports her argument for politically correct speech and language in her assertion that there can never be “a neutral language untainted by any political agenda” (23). The dangers of both political correctness becoming a form of “thought policing,” and of right-wing dismissals of this corrective form of language for this reason, dominated much discussion about political correctness at this time. However,

as South African R W Johnson pointed out at the Institute of Race Relations conference on Political Correctness in 2000, political correctness has come to “[codify a] world of multiculturalism. The logic of complete egalitarianism applied not only to ethnic minorities, but to all groups.” (23) As the 1990s progressed, egalitarian discourses that insisted on the inclusion and acceptance of all ethnic, cultural, and gender groups prevailed and it became increasingly unlikely that one would hear racist or misogynist comments made in public spaces, as speech and language became publicly policed in a more zealous manner than ever before.^{iv}

This policing of language emerges out of, and expands on, Michel Foucault’s notion of normative modalities of power in modern (or post-enlightenment) society. Foucault argues, in his much celebrated *Discipline and Punish*, that in modern societies which no longer relied on monarchic distributions of power a new modality of power emerged: one which was far more efficient and pervasive. For Foucault, in the course of the eighteenth century, the “general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle was supported by...tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micropower that are essentially nonegalitarian and asymmetrical which we call the disciplines” (211). This “micropower,” referred to by Foucault as the “technique, universally widespread, of coercion” (211), is the basis for his notion of normalization which is a system “in which individuals can be distributed around a norm” (Rabinow 20). Thus, for Foucault, the modern individual’s urge to conform to societal norms results in his/her internalizing of societal power, with the result that s/he polices her/his own speech at all times according to these societal norms. An empty political correctness may be understood as an excellent example of normative coercion, and indeed Foucault’s critique of Enlightenment society could be applied to modern democratic societies. His claim that the “Enlightenment, which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines” (211) could be appropriated to a critique of politically correct democracies the world over. While political correctness offers liberation from oppressive discourses of the past, it concurrently invents new forms of discursive coercion. Furthermore, with political correctness, the private and the public spheres of those who do not have political allegiance with these newly accepted forms of language become utterly split from one another. The private sphere becomes a space of enunciating beliefs that may be considered politically incorrect to like-minded people who are unlikely to “blow the whistle” on the speaker in a public sphere, while a sometimes all-too-easy appropriation of politically correct discourse is bandied about in the public sphere, thereby placing the speaker beyond reproach and his/her ideologies beyond interrogation. This split discourse becomes quite absurd in many instances.

Another South African example illustrates the point. In the late 1990s, with an ever-increasing pressure placed on right-wing (racist) groups to integrate into the new South Africa, to conform to the transformation of the nation, such groups appropriated the discourses of multiculturalism and political correctness in order to uphold their right-wing ideologies. The Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging [Afrikaner Resistance Movement], a far-right Afrikaans separatist group, based much of their argument for a separate Afrikaans state which would be closed to black (and English speaking white) South Africans on the discourses of multiculturalism and political correctness. Arguing that the Afrikaans culture and language required protection, as much as the other ten South African languages and all of the multiple religious and cultural differences that the

Rainbow Nation was now expected to be tolerant of, the AWB, although denied this *volkstad* by the government, brought their right-wing ideology into the realm of cultural difference and thereby justified it in the discourses of transformation, reconciliation and acceptance of the time. It thus, quite absurdly, became politically correct to acknowledge the perspectives of the most ardent protectors of the past regime within the discourses of the “new South Africa.” This is clearly an act of appropriating the discourse of struggle that continues to pervade South African society, but with the effect of inverting the original meaning of that discourse.

Another example is the current Afrikaner terrorist group, *Die Volk* [The People], which argues that if the ANC’s military wing, known as *Umkhonto we Sizwe* [Spear of the Nation], resisted the nationalist government with acts of terrorism, then their use of violence and terrorism is a valid form of resistance to the current dispensation. Of course, *Die Volk* fails to understand the complexities of South African political history, but their artless use of the discourse of struggle to these racist ends is more than unsettling. A key player in the group goes so far as to refer to himself as a “white consciousness activist.” While these are extreme, though current, examples of the dangers of inverted appropriations of political correctness, I believe that a similar appropriation of the politically correct discourses of gender equality has occurred, though more pervasively, and cross-culturally and nationally, resulting in similar, and at times entirely unacknowledged, absurdities that should be of interest to feminists.

In popular culture, the ChickLit and girl power phenomena provide good examples of such absurdities. Represented in the media as an empowering form of cultural production for women and girls, these phenomena have been attributed to a postfeminist “Bridget Jones generation,” and thereby engage in the noble work of defying the establishment. I would like to ask exactly which establishment is being defied in this wave of ChickLit films and girl power pop bands: patriarchy or feminism? While the media, quite rightly, claims that these cultural forms critique and challenge societal expectations of passive women and girls, it also forecloses feminist critiques of ChickLit and Girl Power by virtue of putting forth that very argument: that is, if these cultural forms challenge previous stereotypes of women and girls, any feminist dispute aimed at them is depicted as being “over-the-top,” anachronistic and as an example of the new “establishment.” In an article in *The Sunday Times*, Doris Lessing is presented as a “feminist writer” whose feminism is aligned with literary snobbishness in her statement that ChickLit is a series of “instantly forgettable books” (Malala). Moreover, and perhaps more seriously, that the media can make use of these new representations of women, not to challenge stereotypes of women, but to simply create a new homogenizing (at best) and denigrating (at worst) stereotype of women (as seen above in the phrase “Bridget Jones generation”) is evidence of the fact that in such circumstances the media pays lip service to political correctness, whilst displaying absolutely no real political awareness and gender sensitivity in its dealings with these phenomena. To articulate a critique of this kind of politically correct lip service without any real political content is becoming increasingly difficult, since politically correct jargon is simply bandied about in response to any criticism of this kind, thereby absorbing it into what I feel is a very persuasive and pervasive form of hegemonic patriarchal power. A similar problem can be outlined in relation to the concept of postfeminism.

In *Postfeminisms*, Ann Brooks critiques Susan Faludi's argument that postfeminism is a form of backlash (Brooks 3; Faludi 15). For Brooks, the "post" of postfeminism is to be read in much the same way as one would read the "post" in postmodernism or postcolonialism, that is, as a site of critical engagement with that which has preceded these terms. I would argue, however, that Brooks' appropriation of this particular understanding of the prefix "post" for feminism, is itself an example of Faludian backlash. While ever contentious and contended, the terms postmodernism and postcolonialism can be said to have one thing in common – both terms include the hegemonic and/or oppressive systems and movements that they seek to critically engage with: that is, modernism and colonialism. Brooks supports this claim, illustrating her use of the prefix in her claim that "the 'post' of post-colonialism...refers to a continuous engagement with the effects of colonial occupation" (4). Her use of the prefix in this manner would thereby indicate that it is feminism, not patriarchy, that postfeminism is "critically engaging" with. Brooks would not deny this. Indeed, this accords with her view that second wave feminism was nothing other than "hegemonic" (4) in its modality. This is not to say that there were not homogenizing aspects to the second wave, but it seems to me that there is a distinction to be drawn between these homogenizing aspects, which were altered and transformed with their encounter with black American feminisms, Third World feminisms *etc.*, and the claim that the second wave was hegemonic in its impetus. Thus, while Brooks claims that "[p]ostfeminism...occupies a similar 'critical' position [as postcolonialism] in regard to earlier feminist frameworks at the same time as critically engaging with patriarchal and imperialist discourses" (2), I find this statement problematic on four levels: first, I would question whether postfeminism is conceptually necessary for feminism, since if there is one shared truth in all feminisms, it is that they "critically engage with patriarchy"; second, I would argue that the danger of this understanding of postfeminism, as indicated by its name (why is the term post-patriarchy not under interrogation here), is that it focuses more on the failings of past feminist movements than on its own patriarchal environment so that, much as Faludi warned of the less sophisticated media and popular understanding of the term, what it ultimately achieves is to undermine politically effective forms of feminism; third, by insisting that postfeminism is the only space from which to interrogate the problematic aspects of previous modalities of feminism, is to deny the very self-critical and self-aware aspects that postmodernism *has* brought to feminist activities and critiques, and that a third wave may entail; fourth, Brooks' postfeminism seems to me to be a careful and sophisticated apology for second wave feminism, and provides an apology for the new and subtle forms of patriarchy expounded above.

Julia Kristeva observes a broader waning of political affect, which she refers to as a "power vacuum" (4). She argues that "we no longer speak of culpability but of public menace; we no longer speak of fault...but of dangers. Instead of responsibility, there is liability; the idea of responsibility-without-fault is becoming acceptable" (5). This decline of social responsibility, however, cannot be read as a politically neutral space, and in this respect Kristeva's concept of a power vacuum is misleading. It is my view that discourses of political correctness and multiculturalism are in danger of becoming understood as a part of such a "power vacuum," since, as Kristeva herself argues, "perhaps we have in fact arrived at a so-called liberal society in which there is no surveillance and no punishment....Though we are not punished, we are, in effect,

normalized: in place of the prohibition or power that cannot be found, disciplinary and administrative punishments multiply, repressing or, rather, normalizing everyone” (5). Thus, following Foucault, Kristeva understands power to be distributed via normalization and internal surveillance, rather than external surveillance and punishment. Moreover, she quite accurately points to the pervasiveness and subtlety of this modality of power as the reason for why revolt has been effaced in twenty-first century democratic societies. How does one take arms against a protean enemy, one that does not present itself in explicit and definite forms, but makes use of the various liberal discourses to hand, not to challenge the actual distribution of power in society (and I believe one could argue this not only in terms of gender, but in terms of socio-economics, race, sexuality, nationality and a host of other political areas), but to veil such politics and thereby effectively ruin any attempts to revolt against and resist these power relations?

Kristeva makes a similar point with reference to Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, in which he expands on his theory of the Oedipal Triangle in order to articulate how societies come to formulate taboos and their corresponding norms (which, in Freud’s argument, are represented and symbolized through the Totem).^v That is to say, the Oedipal taboo of incest, indeed the Oedipal triangle altogether, is used as a blueprint through which the broader workings and distributions of power in society are analyzed and understood. Kristeva recalls Freud’s argument, specifically those aspects of it that relate to the subject’s urge to appropriate the “father’s” paternal attributes:

‘I’ felt flattered to be promoted to the level of someone who could, if not be the father, at least acquire his qualities, identify with his power; ‘I’ was associated with this power; ‘I’ was not excluded; ‘I’ was one of those who obeyed him and were satisfied with that. But sometimes this identification with power no longer works; ‘I’ feel excluded; ‘I’ can no longer locate power, which has become normalizing and falsifiable. (14)

Kristeva’s reading of Freud is thus positioned at the nexus of the issues of gender and normalization and can thus provide contemporary feminists with an important warning: having “acquired” some of the “father’s” qualities, mostly in terms of the ability to identify with his power – an acquisition that we must acknowledge the first and second waves of feminism for – we must not forget that the power of the father continues to exert itself, and while we may find it increasingly difficult to *locate* this power, we must fervently continue our feminist critiques of such patriarchal (and, via the psychoanalytic model, paternal) forms of power. The contemporary debates regarding feminism must, therefore, be prepared to sift through the layers of veiled language and misappropriations of politically correct language and/or multicultural discourses, since it is only once this process has been effected that we will be able to engage critically with contemporary forms of patriarchy.

I will conclude with an example of an event that occurred on campus at the University of the Witwatersrand, the university at which I teach, on the 27 May 2002 at a Men’s Residence march against sexual abuse. The background to the event is significant, since the march was a response to two cases of rape brought against two Men’s Residence students, both of whom were expelled from the university. Ostensibly, Men’s Residence organized the march, by way of showing their renunciation of the two men charged. The event was, therefore, applauded by the various gender groups and committees on campus – both student and staff-based. It seemed that this march,

organized *by* men and *for* men, was a step in the right direction – an active stance by male students against sexual abuse appeared to be very much in line with the ethos of reconciliation and reparation that the university upholds. The marchers were wearing t-shirts that read “Men’s Residence against Sexual Abuse” and holding placards with seemingly reconstructed slogans, such as “Real Men Don’t Abuse.” I was present at this march and felt very pleased to be associated with a university at which gender politics were not only still alive, but in which we could say we had moved to a new phase in which even something as masculinist in its ethos as a Men’s Residence hall, could be so actively involved in gender related politics.

A few days later it was brought to my attention that complaints were being made about this march by Sotho speaking women students. The speaker for the occasion’s opening remarks, which were in Sotho, and thus incomprehensible to many of those watching the proceedings (and perhaps even involved in the proceedings), were “Men! We must work hard for Cunt!” The speaker then went on to make politically correct statements in English about sexual abuse, all of which were heartily applauded by the women observing the march (the non-Sotho speakers that is).^{vi}

This is clearly problematic, in and of itself, but what is more serious is that the complainants have chosen, thus far, to not take action against the speaker in question because with only four official complaints, these women are (quite rightly) intimidated by the sheer numbers of students at Men’s Residence – all of whom will stand steadfast in their support of one another. When Men’s Residence became aware that such a complaint had been made, the response was an angry one. They did not deny the statement, but could not see why they were being critiqued for it when the purposes of the march were, in their minds, directed at sexual abuse. It has become clear in how this episode is playing itself out at the university that these young men are entirely ignorant as to the ways in which such statements offend women. To them, women’s rights are solely situated in the realm of sexual violation and rape – the rest is, evidently, fair game. More sinister is the implication that the Men’s Residence representative was referring to the actual cases of rape. This can be read in one of two ways. Either, one cannot just “have” sex, one has to work for it, or, the march itself is the “work” being done to “get” sex. The latter reading seems to correspond perfectly to the argument that I have expounded above: these students believe themselves to be politically correct, liberal and gender aware. How is it possible to articulate a feminist response to such an event, where the knee-jerk response will be to point out this *faux* political awareness?

Furthermore, the event is only being relayed *sub rosa* on campus, a confidence that I have no compunction whatsoever in contravening since it seems to me that the way in which the university is dealing with this event accords with Kristeva’s aforementioned statement that we are living in societies that no longer “speak of fault, but of dangers.” The student who made this comment should, in my view, be held to account for his statements. Instead, he simply dismisses the accusations and retains the only video copy of the march, which the university has not obtained. Moreover, the university, in avoiding the dangers of real political conflict on campus, has not intervened on behalf of the handful of Sotho speaking women complainants, but appears to be protecting the representative of Men’s Residence in its refusal to allow this to be spoken about in a public forum.^{vii} It seems to me that to be complicit in the protection of those who are

willing to publicly make these sorts of misogynist statements is to be complicit in misogyny itself, and to become an apologist for the new wave of patriarchy.

As with the example of media discussions of ChickLit and girl power, it becomes clear in this instance that a more thorough political correctness is not going to solve the problem. Indeed, if anything, it is going to make the realm of political inquiry even more opaque, and thus render feminist critiques even more invisible. I am not recommending a new wave of even more zealous political correctness. Instead, it seems to me that a “third wave” of feminism could make use of the consciousness-raising modalities of earlier forms, in that to raise awareness of how to read gendered codes in all popular media, in the academy, in schools and in the political sphere seems to be the only way to empower young women and men against the barrage of codes and messages that continue to perpetuate patriarchy on a variety of levels, and in multiple ways. Unlike postfeminism which, despite Brooks’ insistence that it is more sophisticated than this, is largely constructed in the media (and since most consumers of popular culture and media are not engaging with these forms within a critical space, such as the academy) and suggests that there is no longer a need for critical engagement with mass and popular cultural productions and reproductions of gendered stereotypes, a third wave of consciousness-raising would give young people the tools with which to critically engage with their gendered world. This would not involve the policing of patriarchal forms, but would rather insist that those forms are understood for what they are – would rip off the mask of the politically correct that is at present serving a dangerous re-entrenchment of patriarchal codes and norms.

Moreover, such consciousness-raising cannot occur only within the academy but should occur within those very realms of the media and popular culture. There are already some examples of this, most of which take the form of somewhat obvious reclamations; for example, the representation of househusbands in advertisements for domestic products previously associated exclusively with women. Many of these advertisements are also extremely problematic in that many of them present a parody of alternative families and most of them are hetero-normative. Thus, a far more thorough and coherent campaign needs to be instigated in the realm of media and popular production – one which is presented *as* a feminist politics. In the last century, patriarchy has adapted to feminist inquiry, but it has, ultimately, survived. What is required is that feminism adapt *as feminism*, without apologizing for its political impetus, so as to oppose these new and insidious forms of patriarchy.

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ⁱⁱ Sheila Rowbotham’s *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States* provides a thorough introduction to the history of patriarchy in the western world.

ⁱⁱⁱ Liz McQuiston’s *From Suffragettes to She-Devils: Women’s Liberation and Beyond* provides excellent examples of the severity of such anti-suffrage campaigns.

^{iv} The South African press provides a good example of this – as well as the Human Right Commission, under Barney Pitso, that accused J. M. Coetzee of perpetuating racist stereotypes in his Booker prize winning novel, *Disgrace*.

^v For Freud’s complete argument regarding the relationship between Totems and prohibitions in what he refers to as “savage” societies see *Totem and Taboo* (1-16).

^{vi} Given that there are eleven official languages in South Africa, it is no surprise that not everyone present at the march would understand this comment and that there would be only a handful of Sotho speaking women present to hear the statement.

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